



BOXING PHOTOGRAPHS
LARRY FINK

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
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LARRY FINK

When I think of boxing, I imagine the electricity of a crowd that fills an arena. I think of fighters in robes being led to the ring amid enthusiastic, anxious, and hectoring throngs. I imagine a crescendo of jeers and cheers echoing throughout a hall. I think of two men sizing each other up, waiting for the bell, while the glare of lights and the stares of spectators and cameras rain down on them. In short, I think of a spectacle focused on a fierce exchange of blows, a battle of wits.

I have never been to a boxing match. My images of the sport derive solely from tabloids, television, and the movies. However, it is difficult to imagine boxing without the noise, without the crowds, without the lights, and without the magnetic, centripetal force of the ring.

Larry Fink's BOXING PHOTOGRAPHS, however, shatter expectations. In sifting through the dozens of pictures he has taken in training gyms and arenas since 1986, mostly in greater Philadelphia, one sees but a few boxers in the ring. Fink is not a sports photographer. This series came about through a magazine assignment for *Manhattan Inc.*, but the pictures would hardly do as illustrations for an article in *World Boxing* or *Sports Illustrated*. Fink, for the most part, has photographed fringe activities. His pictures hover around the main event, images captured while weaving in and out of backstage zones. Fink's photographs are set in nondescript corridors, poster-covered dressing rooms, and dimly lit training centers. What we garner from his pictures is that while victory or defeat may be determined in the ring, it is in the wings where one really learns about boxing and its protagonists. These pictures reveal the camaraderie of coaches, managers, and supporters, the hypnotic concentration of training rituals and the respites between bouts.

Fink remembers listening as a youngster to the Friday night fights on the radio with his parents. He also recalls that when he began to watch boxing on television, he would feel agitated, nervous, and his stomach would tie up in knots. However, much to his surprise, when he went to the ring as an adult, he felt completely calm. For him the spectacle had become reality. The boxers were no longer brutal beings or publicity hounds. For all the hype and violence of the ring, for all the ironies and eccentricities of Fink's photographic style, his photographs are profoundly humanistic.

It is this sense of calm and humanity that pervades these photographs. In a previous series of pictures taken in the late 1970s, Fink photographed debutante balls, gala benefits, formal museum functions, and fancy club parties. One would expect that his boxing pictures would have been even more raucous and flashy. Yes, there is the occasional photograph of the loudmouthed spectator or of



the busty "babe" in a sequined halter who parades through the ring holding up a placard with the round number. But these are exceptions. Most of the photographs do not show boxers grandstanding, boasting, and performing for television cameras. Instead, we contemplate men, often exhausted and covered in sweat, whose scarred and puffy faces record the history of their boxing engagements. The photographer has circled around them, much as they circle around each other in the ring, trying to find an opening, a moment, when they are simply themselves. The square shape of the picture frame itself reinforces the feeling of confinement within the arena. The boxers have been cornered by the photographer, captured at close range in relatively shallow spaces. Fink has made self-reflective pictures of self-reflective men.

Fink's photographs are neither simple nor sentimental. There are, for example, many pictures that employ a profusion of visual devices to construct spatially and emotionally complex images. In *BOXING, BLUE HORIZON* (1992), space is fractured through an oblique view into an ostentatiously framed mirror. The result is a disorienting composition created by the tension of the three "figures": a boxer seen from behind, a man largely obscured by the boxer, and the boxer's own menacing shadow. The viewer's implied vantage point is in front of the boxer; yet a back view is all we see. This discombobulation is further complicated by the visual syncopation of repeated vertical elements and the compartmentalization of space. The improbable juxtaposition of the shabby room and the elegant mirror is a metaphor for the grit and glamour, the private and public worlds of boxing. In each photograph, Fink transforms these worlds into a single, coherent but ambiguous whole.

Other pictures, replete with contradictions, are downright surreal and darkly humorous. In *BOXING, BLUE HORIZON* (1991), two men can be seen on the left side of the frame, while in the extreme foreground a boxer lies on his back, corpselike, eyes closed. The young gent in a well-tailored suit with French cuffs seems oblivious to the boxer and looks nervously outside the space of the picture. The other man, seen as a head behind the jacket of a radically cropped third figure, casts a downward glance at the boxer and seems incongruously amused. The lightning-shaped crack on the dramatically lit wall behind the boxer is a cunning visual disruption that reinforces the disjunctive character of the moment.

Some of Fink's images seem to be simply composed of isolated figures set against inky black backgrounds. Such images as the backview "portrait" of boxing promoter Don King—who is imme-

diately recognizable by his distinctive hairdo—or the image of the single, spent boxer steadying himself at the ropes are deceptive in their simplicity. In the picture of King, a small fraction of someone's hair is eclipsed by King's left shoulder, while a barely visible sliver of someone's face, most noticeably an eye, appears from behind his right shoulder. In the image of the lone boxer, two fluorescent light tubes become abstract forms hovering above and to the left of his head. Such seemingly awkward details might once have been airbrushed out or would have elicited a disparaging comment from a picture editor—"That's a really good picture; too bad those imperfections get in the way." But it is these "imperfections," these relatively minute, unanticipated elements, that give Fink's pictures their power. Fink courts distracting forms and the potential loss of pictorial control. Moreover, by titling the photographs generically with the name of the place in which they were taken, he underlines his interest in the boxing subject rather than the personality of the boxer. It is therefore incumbent upon the viewer to seek out the subtleties. Look to the edges. Peer into the murky background. Notice the slogans on T-shirts and the texts on signs and posters.

To make such nuanced, richly chiaroscuroed images, Fink plays the shadowboxer. He snaps pictures spontaneously, attempting to subvert his instinctive compositional sense in the hopes of conquering new and unconventional pictorial territory. He uses his camera to tease his subjects out of the darkness and catch them off guard. And, like the shadowboxer, Fink knows that the contest is ultimately with himself.

—Adam D. Weinberg, Curator, Permanent Collection

inside, from left to right: BOXING, BLUE HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA, PA, 1991;
 BOXING, TYSON-RUDDOCK FIGHT, LAS VEGAS, 1991
 outside, from left to right: BOXING, BLUE HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA, PA, 1989; BOXING, BLUE
 HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA, PA, 1992; BOXING, CHAMPS GYM, PHILADELPHIA, PA, 1993





WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works are by Larry Fink (b. 1941) and in the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art. They have been accessioned as Purchase, with funds from Stephen L. and Linda G. Singer. The accession number appears at the end of each entry.

The works are gelatin silver prints. Dimensions are in inches, followed by centimeters; height precedes width.

BOXING CHAMPS
GYM, PHILADELPHIA
PA 1988
15 13/16 X 19 7/8
(40.2 X 50.5) 96.227.35

BOXING, BLUE
HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA PA 1989
19 13/16 X 15 7/8
(50.3 X 40.3) 96.227.7

BOXING, BLUE
HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA, PA, 1989
19 13/16 X 15 13/16
(50.3 X 40.2) 96.227.8

BOXING, BLUE
HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA PA 1990

19 15/16 X 15 7/8
(50.6 X 40.3) 96.227.11

BOXING, BLUE
HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA, PA 1990
19 15/16 X 15 15/16
(50.6 X 40.5) 96.227.12

BOXING, BLUE
HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA, PA 1990
19 3/4 X 15 13/16
(50.2 X 40.2) 96.227.15

BOXING, BLUE
HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA PA 1990
19 13/16 X 15 15/16
(50.3 X 40.5) 96.227.16

BOXING, BLUE
HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA, PA 1990
19 13/16 X 15 15/16
(50.3 X 40.5) 96.227.17

BOXING, BLUE
HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA PA 1991
19 13/16 X 15 7/8
(50.3 X 40.3) 96.227.18

BOXING, BLUE
HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA, PA 1991
19 7/8 X 15 15/16
(50.5 X 40.5) 96.227.19

BOXING, BLUE
HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA, PA 1991

19 13/16 X 15 15/16
(50.3 X 40.5) 96.227.22

BOXING, BLUE
HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA PA 1991
19 7/8 X 15 7/8
(50.5 X 40.3) 96.227.24

BOXING, TYSON-
RUDDOCK FIGHT LAS
VEGAS 1991
19 3/16 X 15 15/16
(48.7 X 40.5) 96.227.48

BOXING, BLUE
HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA PA, 1992
19 7/8 X 14 13/16
(50.5 X 37.6) 96.227.26

BOXING, BLUE
HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA PA 1992
19 13/16 X 15 13/16
(50.3 X 40.2) 96.227.28

BOXING, CHAMPS
GYM, PHILADELPHIA,
PA, 1993
19 13/16 X 15 13/16
(50.3 X 40.2) 96.227.37

BOXING, CHAMPS
GYM, PHILADELPHIA,
PA, 1993
19 13/16 X 15 13/16
(50.3 X 40.2) 96.227.38

BOXING, CHAMPS
GYM, PHILADELPHIA,
PA 1993

19 13/16 X 15 13/16
(50.3 X 40.2) 96.227.39

BOXING, CHAMPS
GYM, PHILADELPHIA,
PA, 1993
19 7/8 X 15 13/16
(50.5 X 40.2) 96.227.42

BOXING, CHAMPS
GYM, PHILADELPHIA,
PA, 1993
19 13/16 X 15 3/4
(50.3 X 40) 96.227.44

CHAMPS GYM, PHILADELPHIA, PA, 1993
19 15/16 X 14 13/16
(50.6 X 37.6) 96.227.52

CHAMPS GYM, PHILADELPHIA, PA, 1993
19 7/8 X 15 13/16
(50.5 X 40.2) 96.227.51

BOXING, BLUE
HORIZON, PHILADELPHIA PA, 1994
19 13/16 X 15 13/16
(50.3 X 40.2) 96.227.29

BOXING, STATE
THEATRE, EASTON, PA,
1994
19 13/16 X 15 13/16
(50.3 X 40.2) 96.227.47

BOXING, BETHLEHEM,
PA 1995
19 13/16 X 16
(50.3 X 40.6) 96.227.5

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